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ABSTRACT

Research has provided support for the existence of certain actor-observer and self-serving biases in individuals' retrospective analyses about the causes of behavior. A question that has been relatively unexplored deals with whether the findings on actor-observer differences and the self-serving pattern in attributions are generalizable to persons' predictive judgments about the factors that influence future behavior. Undergraduates (N=83) were asked to imagine either their own or someone else's past or future behavior in three different situations, and then to make appropriate causal judgments. Significant differences occurred in judgments about factors potentially affecting future performance as opposed to attributions about past performance; future judgments were more dispositional than attributions about past behaviors. Evidence was also found that actor-observer and self-serving biases were present in both past and future attributional judgments. The findings suggest that a difference exists between the way an individual accounts for past behavior and the judgments an individual makes about potential factors likely to affect future behavior. (Author/NRB)

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A Comparison of Past and Future Attributional Judgments

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A Comparison of Past and Future Attributional Judgments

Social psychologists have for some time been interested in the role of cognition in social behavior. Indeed, a major focus of the 1970's was on studying individuals' causal attribution processes. Much of this work centered on exploring systematic biases in attribution processes including actor-observer differences (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) and the oft documented self-serving pattern of individuals' attributions (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975).

The tendency for actors to attribute their behavior to situational constraints and for observers to attribute the same behavior to actors' dispositions has received much empirical support (e.g., Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973) and numerous studies have explored the processes underlying this divergence (c.f., Miller & Norman, 1975; Regan & Totten, 1975; Storms, 1973). Similarly, individuals' self-serving patterns of attributing successful outcomes to personal factors while blaming failures on external conditions also has a broad empirical base (see Bradley, 1978, for a review). Thus there is considerable support for the existence of such biases in individuals' retrospective analyses about the causes of behavior.

One question that has been relatively unexplored is whether or not the findings on actor-observer differences and the self-serving pattern in attributions will generalize to people's predictive judgments about the factors they feel will influence future behavior. That is, will actors and observers show a similar pattern of divergence in predicting the determinants of future behavior? Also, will individuals, in predicting the determinants of future successes and failures, display a similar self-serving pattern? The answers to these questions will bear on the broader issue of whether or not attributions for past behavior have any implications for predictions about the factors likely to affect future behavior.

The primary purpose of the present study, then, was to explore the effects of time perspective on people's judgments about the factors affecting behavior. Making attributional judgments about past vs. future behavior may be an important variable influencing the nature of attributions just as other variables, including actor vs. observer role (Jones & Nisbett, 1971), the salience of behavior (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), and outcome of behavior (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975), have been shown to have a substantial impact upon attributions. The lack of studies examining the impact of the time perspective variable on attributions, or more specifically the nature of future attributions, is interesting in light of the fact that a number of studies have shown people's manipulated expectancies about what will influence performance in some future situation may have a substantial effect on actual behavior (e.g., Dweck, 1975; Shrauger & Sorman, 1977). Thus, predictive attributional judgments appear to be a legitimate area for inquiry in their own right.

The procedure for the study involved asking individuals either to make attributional judgments about specific behaviors that had already occurred or to predict the factors that they felt would influence specific future behaviors. In addition, some people were asked to make these judgments about their own behavior, while others did so with respect to the behavior of someone else. Individuals' judgments about whether or not the behavior under consideration was or would be successful or unsuccessful were also elicited in order to compare them with attributional judgments. Specifically, if the self-serving pattern of attributions often found in accounting for past behavior is present in future judgments, individuals expecting to do well in some situation should predict personal factors would influence these performances, while those expecting to do poorly would indicate the expectation that the qualities of the situation would be most important.

The experimental task subjects were exposed to in the present study

involved asking individuals to imagine either their own or someone else's past or future behavior in three separate situations. Judgments about the determinants of behavior in a social situation (a party), an academic situation (deciding on one's semester course load), and an employment situation (a job interview) were elicited. It was felt that these three types of situations would be salient ones for the college population under study, representing areas where these kinds of attributional judgments might most often spontaneously be made. Thus the present study not only tested for the existence of such biases in making future judgments as well as judgments about past behavior, but it also examined whether or not these biases were exhibited in individuals across a variety of situations.

In summary, the purposes of the present study included the following:

1. To examine the influence of time perspective on causal attributions. A comparison of attributions about past behavior with predictions of the factors likely to affect future behavior was made to see if time perspective has an impact on the nature of attributions.

2. To see if the actor-observer and self-serving bias findings extend to situations where judgments about factors affecting future behavior are made.

3. To investigate the influence of type of situation on the pattern of individuals' attributions.

Method

Design

The experiment was run as a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 between-within factorial design with time perspective (past, future), role (actor, observer), sex (male, female), and order of presentation of situations (social, academic, job vs. job, academic, social) as the between subjects factors and type of situation (social, academic, job) as the within subjects factor.

Subjects

Forty male and 43 female undergraduates participated in this study to partially fulfill an introductory psychology course requirement. All subjects were run in groups ranging from 4 to 8.

Procedure

Upon arrival for the study, subjects were seated in chairs arranged in a circle with everyone facing the center of the circle. A brief set of instructions containing the rationale for the study was then presented verbally to subjects as a group. The experiment was described as exploring people's perceptions of the factors that influence behavior in various situations. The combination of the two levels of time perspective with the two levels of role yielded four separate conditions: actor-past, actor-future, observer-past, and observer-future. Each subject was assigned to only one condition and each experimental group necessarily contained only subjects from one of the four experimental conditions.

After receiving the initial instructions as to the general purpose of the study, subjects were then required to take part in an imaginal task. Depending on the condition, this involved having them sit back and close their eyes and imagine their own or someone else's past or future behavior in three different situations: at a party (social situation), deciding on a semester's course load (academic situation), and at a job interview (job situation). While subjects were sitting back and reflecting about each situation, the experimenter presented a set of descriptive statements about each situation in order to involve subjects in the imaginal task. Within each experimental condition approximately half of the subjects imagined the party scene followed by the course decision scene and then the job interview scene. For the other half the order was reversed. After the last scenario was presented, all subjects were asked to respond to a questionnaire which contained the major dependent measures.

The questionnaire contained two types of closed-ended measures. First subjects indicated on three separate (1(performed poorly) to 10(performed well)) Likert Scales how well they thought they or the other person would or did perform in each of the three situations. Closed-ended measures of attributions for behavior in each of the three situations were then provided. Subjects were presented with two separate rating scales for each situation. One rating scale asked them to indicate the importance of personal qualities in determining the behavior. These ratings were also obtained on a 1 to 10 Likert Scale with higher numbered responses indicating greater importance. Subjects, then, in a similar fashion, indicated the importance of qualities of the situation on a second rating scale. These two rating scales were presented in eliciting attributions for each of the three situations.

Results

Since no main effects or interactions were observed for order of presentation the results reported collapse across this variable. The main closed-ended index of attribution involved a difference score which subtracted the subject's ratings of how important situational factors were in determining the imagined behavior from the rated importance of personal factors.

Time Perspective Findings

One of the primary purposes of the present study was to examine the potential influence of time perspective on attributions for behavior. And, significant differences were found in judgments about factors potentially affecting future performance as opposed to attributions about past performance. Future judgments were more dispositional than were attributions about past behavior (M's = 1.31 and .16, respectively), $F(1,75) = 4.75$, $p < .031$.

Actor-Observer Findings

Another major focus of the present study was to examine whether or not

the typical pattern of actor-observer differences in attributions would be found, especially in trying to extend these findings to situations where future judgments are being made. Although there was a tendency for actors to be more situational in their judgments than observers (M's = .31 and 1.03, respectively) this effect did not reach significance ($F(2,75) = 1.97$, p = ns). However, a significant Role x Type of Situation x Time Perspective interaction was observed, $F(2,150) = 3.91$, $p < .03$. As can be seen in the pattern of means displayed in Table 1, the actor-observer effect was displayed for past and future judgments in some of the three situations. For the party situation, post hoc analyses revealed that actors were significantly more situational than observers in their judgments about future behavior. However, the actor-observer effect did not replicate in past judgments where a non-significant trend toward actors being more dispositional in their judgments was obtained.

In both the academic and job situation judgments, the typical actor-observer effect on judgments for past behavior was observed. The actor-observer finding was not displayed in either situation for future judgments, however. It thus appears that whether or not one finds an actor-observer pattern of causal judgments may depend upon the nature of the situation and the time perspective of such judgments.

Situational Differences in Causal Judgments

Analysis of causal judgments revealed a significant main effect of type of situation. Subjects generally were more likely to feel that performance in a social or party situation was more dispositionally based than behavior in the other two situations, $F(2,150) = 4.76$, $p < .01$ (see Table 2).

Self-Serving Bias Findings

Correlational analyses were carried out to investigate the relationship between subjects' perceptions of how successful the imagined behavior was, or

was expected to be, and their attributions for the behavior. The measures of valence of performance were separately summed across the three situations into total scores for each subject. Similarly, the measures of attribution were each combined across the three situations into total attribution scores. In each case, higher total scores reflected more successful perceived performance and more attribution to personal factors, respectively. It was thus expected that if self-serving biases were operating in people's attributional processes, positive correlations between the performance measures and the attribution measures would be observed.

Moreover, if these biases are truly to be considered self-serving, the greater propensity of personal attributions for more successful perceived performance should occur largely for individuals making judgments about themselves. Such a positive correlation was in fact observed for actor subjects ($r = .39$, $p < .05$). However, observer subjects also evidenced a positive correlation although it was nonsignificant ($r = .22$, p = ns). While the correlation for actors was significant, the difference between the correlations for actors and observers did not reach significance (z 1). When the positive correlation between measures of attribution and perceived valence of performance was considered separately for actors making judgments about past behavior versus those judging future behavior, the correlations still reached significance ($r = .55$, $p < .01$ and $r = .33$, p .05, respectively). This suggests that self-serving biases may operate when making future attributional judgments as well as judgments about past behavior. However, the correlation was higher, though not significantly so ($z < 1$), for past judgments where chances for the invalidation of self-serving pattern of attribution are perhaps less likely.

Discussion

Basically, the findings of this study suggest that a difference does exist between the way individuals account for past behavior and the judgments individuals make regarding the potential factors likely to affect future behavior. Subjects made significantly more attributions to personal factors when considering future as opposed to past behaviors. A possible explanation for this finding may be that uncertainty with respect to future events, a state which can often be psychologically aversive, can be reduced if one predicts future occurrences will be dispositionally caused. Believing one's own or someone else's behavior will be dispositionally determined may seemingly render it more predictable and controllable.

A second important finding in this study was the extension of the actor-observer findings to include some instances of predictive attributional judgment. Important situational differences were found with respect to the actor-observer effect. In the social situation, an actor-observer divergence in attributions was found in future but not in past judgments. The reverse was true for academic and job situations with the actor-observer effect being observed for past but not future judgments. Situational differences thus appear to be an important variable relating to whether or not actor-observer differences will be found for future as opposed to past attributional judgments.

Variation of the type of situation in which behavior was imagined to occur also exerted overall main effects on attributional judgments. Subjects viewed social or party behavior as more dispositionally based than academic or job behavior.

The findings of the present study also suggested the presence of self-serving biases in individuals' attributional judgments. Correlational data supported the notion of there being a tendency for individuals to rate more successful behavior as more dispositionally caused. While this tendency was

stronger for individuals rating their own behavior, it was interesting to note that observers judging the behavior of someone else displayed a similar bias. This finding, if consistently replicated, could perhaps cast doubt on the self-esteem enhancing interpretation of self-serving biases offered in the past. Rather, it may be that individuals tend to judge successful behavior as due to personal factors whether it is their own performance or someone else's.

It was also interesting to note that the self-serving pattern of attributions for actors was stronger for past as opposed to future judgments. It seems likely that future attributional judgments are necessarily more conservative due to the potential for such self-serving assessments to be invalidated. Retrospective judgments about the causes of past successes or failures show less potential to be proven wrong.

The overall pattern of findings for the present study thus suggests that differences do exist in the way individuals account for past versus future behavior. Similarly, there is some evidence for the existence of actor-observer and self-serving attributional biases in future as well as past attributional judgments. Future research is being planned to explore the potential mechanisms underlying differences in attributional judgments that occur as a function of time perspective.

Footnote

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Table 1

Subjects' Causal Attribution as a Function of Type of Situation, Role, and Time Perspective

Time Perspective	Social		Academic		Job	
	Actor	Observer	Actor	Observer	Actor	Observer
Past	1.8_{C} (20)	1.0_{BC} (23)	-1.45_{A} (20)	$.48_{B}$ (23)	-1.05_{A} (20)	$.04_{B}$ (23)
Future	$.59_{B}$ (17)	3.3_{D} (23)	1.0_{BC} (17)	$.35_{B}$ (23)	1.29_{C} (17)	1.04_{BC} (23)

Note.--ns are shown in parentheses. Larger numbers indicate more attribution to personal qualities. Means not sharing a common subscript differed at the .05 level of significance using Newman-Keuls Unequal N pairwise comparisons.

Table 2

Subjects' Causal Attributions as a Function of Type of Situation

Situation	Mean Attribution
Social	1.75_A
Academic	$.08_B$
Job	$.31_B$

Note.--Larger numbers indicate more attribution to personal qualities. Means not sharing a common subscript differed at the .05 level of significance.